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By Roxana Tiron

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The House's top defense appropriator said on Thursday that canceling a second engine for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter would be a "mistake."

Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) indicated that he stands firm on including funds for a second F-35 engine developed by General Electric and Rolls Royce. One of his arguments is that too much money has already been spent on an alternate engine to slash the program after several years of development.

The GE-Rolls-Royce team received a \$2.5 billion contract in 2005 to build the second engine and the government has paid out \$1.7 billion, or 70 percent, of that contract on the engine development.

Pratt & Whitney was selected from the inception of the F-35 program as the primary engine builder.

Murtha's Senate counterpart, Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), decided not to include funding for the second engine in the Senate's version of the 2010 defense appropriations bill, but left the window open for money to be included in

conference negotiations with the House, which included funding. Inouye in the past supported a second engine, but this year wanted to see his defense bill pass, because the Office of Management and Budget threatened to recommend a veto over the alternate engine program.

As the House passed the conference report of the 2010 defense authorization bill, the White House had not renewed a veto threat over the defense authorizers' decision to green-light funding for a second engine in the final 2010 defense policy bill. No renewed veto threat could also empower the appropriators to go ahead with the funding.

Both Pratt & Whitney and GE-Rolls Royce have experienced and detected problems during testing of their respective engines — something that is expected to happen for complex fighter jet engines in development. However, problems with the engines have received additional scrutiny as Congress decides whether to continue with the alternate engine program. But the stakes have been very high for the companies, with Pratt & Whitney fighting to stay the only producer of the engines and GE-Rolls Royce fighting to keep the secondary role.

The fighter jet engine market for the F-35 is projected at \$100 billion over the next few decades.

The most recent testing problem comes from the GE-Rolls Royce team. The same day defense authorizers officially announced their decision to support the second engine program, GE-Rolls Royce announced that it has stopped running its development engine after a routine borescope inspection (the borescope is an optical device used to inspect engines). The engine has been removed from test for teardown and any further running of will be based upon review of root cause assessment which is due to be completed Friday.

One of the strongest supporters of a second engine, Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii), the chairman of the House Armed Services Air and Land subcommittee, said that problems found in testing only underscore the need to have more than one engine for more than 2,000 jet fighters.

"You need to have parallel engine developments," Abercrombie said on Thursday. "The Congress is not interested in picking winners. The Congress is interested in making sure that we at least have parallel development so that in case something goes wrong which is likely-- even Secretary [of Defense Robert] Gates has said given the challenges facing the development on this particular [F-35] engine it is likely that there are going to be setbacks."

However, Gates has also made the case that the Pentagon only needs one engine and feels comfortable relying on the primary Pratt & Whitney engine. The Pentagon's biggest congressional supporters on this issue come from the Connecticut, where Pratt & Whitney builds the F-35 engine. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), President Barack Obama's onetime presidential rival, also opposes spending money on a

second engine.